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Revealing the Race-Based Realities of Workforce Exclusion

Tanya K. Hernandez

Fordham University School of Law, THERNANDEZ@law.fordham.edu

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TANYA KATERÍ HERNÁNDEZ

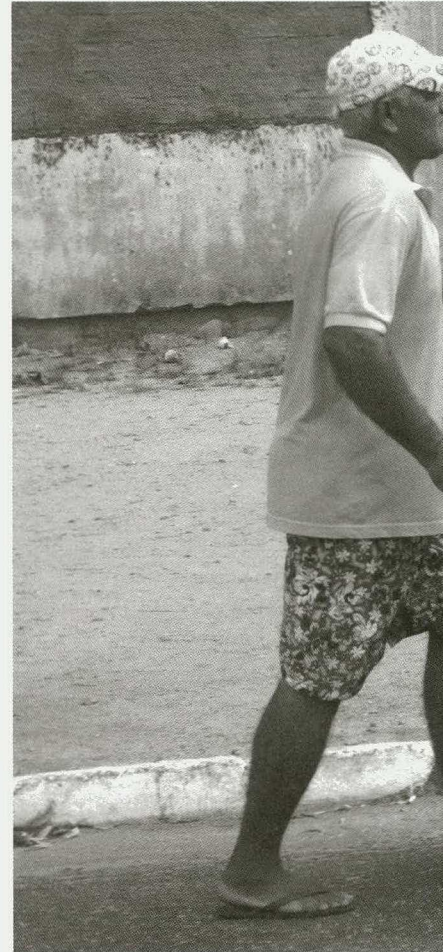
Revealing the Race-Based Realities of Workforce Exclusion

Advocates in the fight against poverty in Latin America often center class above race as the factor that most determines Afro-descendants' life-chances. But a growing movement is setting the record straight.

Believing that the black population will be able to reach basic equality independently from what happens with the rest of poor Colombians, within general social policy, or economic growth...is dreaming in a vacuum," said sociologist Daniel Mera Villamizar in a 2009 *El Tiempo* column on the Colombian government's workplace affirmative action measures. Mera continues: "To resolve the historic ambiguity between racism and classism...by saying that race is the determining factor, is to buy a ticket to a conflict we don't even know." As critics of the column noted at the time, Mera's words were at odds with many of the demands of the growing movements for racial justice across Latin America that have proliferated over the past 15 years. These groups are engaged in the fight to raise awareness of

the ways race-based discrimination in Latin America cannot be sufficiently explained by the analyses—touted by many advocates and organizations engaged in anti-poverty struggles—that class is the determining mechanism of social and economic marginalization.

There are approximately 150 million people of African descent in Latin America, representing just over 30% of the total population and more than 40% of the poor. Advocates for racial equality in Latin America testify statistically and anecdotally to the fact that Afro-descendants face the frequent perception that they are undesirable elements of society, and are marginalized in politics, media, public life, the job market, and education systems. Mera's call to avoid conflict by holding up class above race as the most salient factor in determining the



life-chances of Afro-descendants echoes the notion—still widely held in much of Latin America—of the “myth of racial democracy.” Increasingly critiqued over the past 20 years, the myth holds that Latin America's racial mixture (*mestizaje/mestiçagem*) creates racial harmony and inherently guards against racial discord and inequality. This denial of racism is often rooted in a belief system that contrasts itself to the history of Jim Crow legislation in the United States. There is no more



Brazilian street vendor. CÍCERO R. C. OMENA / CREATIVE COMMONS

important place to understand the persistence of race-based marginalization in Latin America than in the increasingly well documented practices of labor market discrimination.

A number of studies that control for socio-economic status, including a 2010 report by the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics, have found that racial disparities within each class strata exist in ways that underscore the operation of

racism as separate from that of classism. According to George Reid Andrews' *Afro-Latin America*, studies of hiring patterns across the region have found employers very reluctant to hire Afro-descendants for managerial, professional, or technical positions, for white-collar clerical jobs, and even for low-level jobs in retail commerce and sales. The small black middle class that exists in Latin America is primarily employed by national government agencies. Once hired, Afro-descendants are located in

low-status positions, with lower rates of promotion and advancement and higher rates of dismissal.

Many social scientists explain this discrimination as a product of race-neutral socioeconomic exclusion that affects Afro-descendants from a young age because of their relative poverty, rather than their race. And indeed, the Latin America education system ensures that the majority of Afro-descendants cannot use education as a gateway to upward mobility, with students of African descent often relegated to underfinanced public schools while economically privileged white and mestizo children attend better-resourced private schools.

But studies still show that labor market discrimination persists independently from levels of educational achievement. As Gustavo Marquez points out in a 2007 Inter-American Development Bank report, studies of the service and construction industries, in which little racial disparity exists in the educational level of the employees, still demonstrate that Afro-descendants are paid a lower wage. And socioeconomic analysts Olivier Barbary and Fernando Urrea demonstrate in their 2004 anthology *Black People in Colombia*, that regardless of the educational advantage that an Afro-Colombian job applicant may have in terms of academic and professional degrees, racial discrimination still depresses his or her job opportunities and wages. According to the National Union School (ENS), which released the first in-depth study of the Afro-Colombian labor situation in four major Colombian

cities, 65% of Afro-Colombians in the informal sector and 29% in the formal sector make less than the minimum wage.

Unemployment rates, too, are disproportionately high for Afro-descendants. According to a 2012 UNESCO report, in Ecuador, Afro-Ecuadorans have the highest rate of unemployment in the country. When they are employed, they are primarily maids, security guards, porters, drivers, or temporary workers in the informal economy. In Uruguay, the Afro-Uruguayan unemployment rate is 50% higher than that of whites, and their earnings are 60% that of whites', according to Andrews.

The subordinated status of Afro-descendants in the labor force is naturalized through a process of racial stereotyping, in which racialized views that denigrate blackness become embedded in the social fiber of each respective society. These views are in turn manifested in the data showing a statistically significant pattern of race influencing earnings and shaping occupational segregation. In Peru, for example, 40% of Afro-Peruvians work in low-skill jobs, and most Afro-Peruvians are employed in low-status positions such as drivers, porters, pallbearers, or babysitters. Moreover, Peruvian help-wanted advertisements seeking drivers, cooks, doormen, butlers, and maids often state a preference for nonwhites (*negros* or *morenos*). Afro-Peruvians do not generally hold leadership positions in government or business, and it is widely believed that the navy and air force follow unstated policies

that exclude blacks from the officers corps.

Similarly, in Cuba, where employment heavily relies on the tourist sector, Afro-Cubans are systematically excluded from jobs in the industry as employers demand a "*buena apariencia*" (good appearance), a well-known euphemism for white phenotype, as a job prerequisite. In many locations with vibrant tourist economies such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Venezuela, Afro-descendants find that they can only earn high wages through the most informal of tourism-related jobs: paid sex work or drug dealing.

Afro-descendant access to the protections of the formal labor market are constrained through the practices of private employment agencies. In a 2008 CLASCO publication on poverty and ethno-racial discrimination, economists noted that in Cali, Colombia, despite the existence of protective labor laws, the vast majority of Afro-descendant women who access domestic service positions through employment agencies are relegated to ill-serving exploitative contracts that flagrantly violate Colombian labor laws. And while employment agencies will place Afro-descendant women in domestic service positions, they rarely negotiate written employment contracts on their behalf. Instead, the work contracts are often verbal and offer even fewer protections than the unilateral contracts that are the norm for written employment contracts in Colombia.

Unfortunately, the legal response to addressing employment discrimination in

Latin American societies has been to criminalize it as the aberrant conduct of exceptional individuals. This case-based response neglects the systemic discrimination that exists in the workplace. Peru is one of about six nations in the region to directly address the issue of discrimination within its employment laws. While this is an important improvement in a region-wide legal climate that denies the structural nature of racial discrimination, these laws do not adequately address the problem of discriminatory advertisement—it is still common to see employers mandate the racially coded "good appearance" requirement. And where the employment laws do exist, they have been poorly enforced. In fact, as Joaquim Benedito Barbosa Gomes, the first black Federal Supreme Court Justice of Brazil, told me in 2007, "the few people who might approach a state prosecutor [to lodge a case of discrimination] encounter prosecutors who would conclude that they don't have a valid case."

But indigenous and Afro-descendant social justice activists have, over the last few years, been successful in lobbying for ethnic and racial policies of inclusion. The pursuit of racial justice started to gain traction in the region with the emergence of democratic governments during the 1980s and 1990s—and later with the participation of social movements in international fora. One important watershed forum was the 2000 preparatory conference in Santiago, Chile, in anticipation of the 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism, in

which more than 1,700 Afro-Latino activists participated. More recently, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent, and 2013-2023 as the decade of African Descendants. While these celebrations of Afro-descendant peoples seem symbolic on many fronts, the UN has cited the need to strengthen domestic action and legislation to ensure the full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil, and political rights of all Afro-descendants.

As a result of the international advocacy and subsequent networking, many Afro-descendant organizations in the region have been able to put pressure on their public officials at the national level by increasing the international limelight on their stark racial inequalities. In many cases, the initial steps to consideration of racial inclusion policies have involved the creation of government agencies dedicated to Afro-descendant equality. Special government ombudspersons dealing with racism on the national level now operate in every Latin American country except El Salvador, Chile, and Paraguay. In addition, a number of countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, and Uruguay have initiated affirmative action policies.

Examining the reality of race-based labor market discrimination in Latin America can shed light on the U.S. racial context today. As in Latin America, the racial justice movement in the United States has reached a decisive turning

point. While the formal mechanisms for addressing racial inequality have long been in place, there is a growing societal belief that it is no longer necessary for the government to be proactively engaged in ensuring racial equality in our presumably “post-racial” society. The contemporary characterization of the United States as post-racial can be traced back to the 1980’s Reagan era conservative efforts to reverse the gains of the civil-rights movement based upon the notion that past civil rights successes made the continued existence of civil rights policies unnecessary. The result is that today a racial hierarchy continues to exist alongside a deteriorated social commitment to race-based programs.

The Latin American context—which, as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has put it, may have been “post-racial” long before the United States was—illustrates how resistance to post-racialism can be possible even after decades of post-racial rhetoric. Latin American countries have shifted away from defending the myth of racial innocence in nations with large populations of Afro-descendants—or from marginalizing an invisible minority of Afro-descendants in largely indigenous “mestizo” nations such as Peru and Bolivia—to slowly acknowledging the salience of

race and racism.

Within an increasingly convergent system of race-based exclusion, Afro-descendant political struggles in the United States and Latin America are finding common ground. Just as Latin American national censuses often omit questions on racial or ethnic origin—leaving people of African descent historically undercounted—the U.S. Census Bureau is now considering modifying the census demographic questions so as to remove the Hispanic/Latino option as an ethnic choice, homogenizing “Latino” as a racial category instead. Afro-Latino organizations have drawn inspiration from the Latin American Afro-descendant census recognition movement in their response, calling attention to the potential of this census reform to diminish an accurate count of Afro-Latinos, therefore shielding their ability to demonstrate that racial disparities do exist, and demand adequate resources from the state. The Afro-Latin@ Forum is one of several visible organizations that is drawing strongly from collaborations between U.S. based racial justice activists and those in Latin America. It is perhaps by the strategically combined efforts of social justice advocates working together across the region that racial equality across the Americas can finally be realized. ■

Tanya Kateri Hernández is a professor of law at Fordham University Law School and author of Racial Subordination in Latin America: The Role of the State, Customary Law, and the New Civil Rights Response (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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